

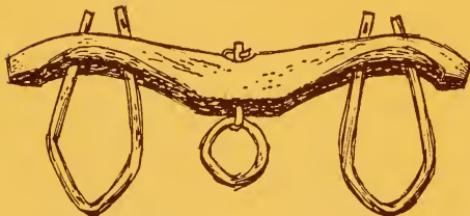


THE
ROMANCE
OF
ALTON

By
OTTO EISENSCHIML



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THE ROMANCE OF ALTON

Otto Eisenschiml

ONE DAY I happened to pass through the city of Alton and decided to stop over for a while. Like most of us, I had hazy recollections of certain historical events that had transpired in that old Mississippi River town, but the particular recollection that happened to pass through my mind concerned an old penitentiary that once stood there and was later used as a prison for Confederate soldiers. I was determined to find the spot where it once had been and to view whatever there was left of it.

It is not so easy as it sounds to get launched on an historical mission of this kind. People who are easily accessible, such as policemen or employees of gas stations, are apt to consider you slightly deranged when you ask them anything but questions connected with their daily routine. Chambers of Commerce and Automobile Clubs are seldom, if ever, better posted. They know all about populations, factory outputs and road conditions, but when it comes to historical data they are rather lost. In this particular instance a kindly old gentleman directed me to the offices of the Sparks Milling Co., remarking good-naturedly that Mr. R. D. Sparks was somewhat of my type—meaning that we both had a screw loose somewhere.

A few minutes later I found myself in the office of the above mentioned firm and asked a greatly astonished clerk if he could direct me to the site of the old prison structure. Hardly had I finished my question when Mr. Sparks rushed out of his private office, inquiring who the man was that seemed interested in this historical matter. Mr. Sparks and I understood each other from the moment we shook hands. "You are right on the prison site where you stand," he explained to me. "This office stands on the corner of what was once the great prison yard, and I can show you some of the old walls that are still in existence."

According to Mr. Sparks' information, the prison stood about two blocks away from the main square of the town and no more than fifty yards from the banks of the Mississippi River. I had been under the impression that it had been abandoned in 1858 for sanitary reasons, but had been re-opened and turned over to the federal authorities after the outbreak of the Civil War. Mr. Sparks, on the other hand, was sure that there was no interval between the time the penitentiary functioned as a state institution and the time it was opened for military prisoners. Sitting on the stone steps of the office, we argued this matter out until the late hours of the evening; in the end Mr. Sparks won. He got in touch with several men whose fathers had been guards; they remembered that there was no interruption of service and that the penitentiary had passed from state into federal possession as a going concern, as it were.

Life in the penitentiary did not develop along pleasant lines. In the course of time the place turned into a regular pest house. No less than 1450 soldiers of the Confederacy died there from smallpox and are now buried in Alton. About three miles from the center of the town, hidden behind hedges and accessible only through an old-time country road, lies their burying ground. As one enters the gate of this cemetery, one is con-

fronted with a tall obelisk on which are marked the names of these unfortunate boys who died so far from their homes. This tombstone was erected by the United States Government and contains an inscription, confirming that the death of these prisoners of war was due to the pestilence to which they succumbed. As you stand at the foot of the monument, you see way in the distance an island in the Mississippi River on which an overflow of prisoners was kept at one time.

However, not all the inmates of the Alton prison submitted to their fate without at least a fight to regain their freedom. At one time, about thirty of them crept through a sewer and managed to escape. The sewer led directly to the Mississippi River, and as the men left the penitentiary behind them they had no other recourse but to jump right into the stream. Nothing was ever heard of them again. Whether they drowned or reached Dixieland in safety, is one of the questions to which there is no answer.

It is rather unfortunate that, about five years ago, when miniature golf courses were in fashion, some one used the prison grounds for this purpose and tore down practically all there was left of the old walls. Today, only one little pillar still stands close to the office, as a solitary reminder of the past.

The name of Alton naturally calls to mind that of Elijah P. Lovejoy. This rabid abolitionist had been driven out of St. Louis in 1836 and settled in Alton; there he founded a little paper in which he expressed his opinions, much to the disgust of the population. Illinois, ten years previously, had abolished slavery by means of a plebiscite; but the people living in the Southern counties were by no means inclined to help eliminate slavery below the Mason and Dixie Line. Lovejoy, to them, was an unwelcome agitator; he finally made himself so obnoxious that a mob stormed his place of business and threw his press into

the Mississippi. With the aid of some friends Lovejoy obtained a new press; another riot followed, in the course of which the young fanatic was shot to death. The new press was then demolished and again dumped into the river.

The site of Lovejoy's establishment was directly opposite the penitentiary and hardly a stone's throw from the offices of the Sparks Milling Co. Through the generosity of Mr. Sparks a memorial tablet has been placed on the spot where Lovejoy had his shop and where he lost his life.

For many years it had been Mr. Sparks' ambition to recover Lovejoy's presses from the river bed, but this proved by no means an easy task. However, on one occasion when the Mississippi was unusually low, his efforts were rewarded with success, and one press stands today in front of the Sparks office building. On its rusty surface the traces of the mob's fury are still plainly visible, and the marks of sledge hammers and other instruments of destruction bear silent witness to the struggle that took place here a hundred years ago.

The main square of Alton, abutting close to the river's edge, marks the spot where in 1858 one of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates took place. The first impression the visitor receives is that the site must have given thousands of people an opportunity to hear the speakers. However, this is not the case. At the time of the debate, part of the square was occupied by the city hall. This edifice has been torn down since and has never been erected again. Even so, it seems to me that Alton formed one of the most beautiful backgrounds for a contest between these two orators and is perhaps only matched by Galesburg, where the speakers stood against the walls of the old Knox College building, with the beautiful campus of the university in front of it.

The people of Alton will tell you that their city was a thriv-

ing place at a time when St. Louis was still a struggling village. They will show you the fine old buildings along the water front, even more attractive to the historically inclined visitor than the modern residential hill section, or the romantically located city cemetery with Lovejoy's monument.

On the little strip of land lying between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, which here flow only about ten miles apart before their waters join a few miles below, is the spot where the memorable duel between Lincoln and Shields was to take place. When Shields was Democratic treasurer of the state, Lincoln angered him with anonymous contributions to the *Sangamon Journal* and was eventually challenged by his irate victim. The giant lawyer of Springfield chose cavalry swords for his weapons, and as Shields was only about half his size, the contest would have developed into a farce if it had taken place. It is recorded that the space for the two contestants was duly marked off, whereupon it was found that neither of the two opponents could have reached across the lines that separated them. Although the fight was called off, it is said that Lincoln never allowed anyone to refer to this episode, nor did he ever mention it himself. It was perhaps less the threatened duel than his anonymous attacks upon Shields that made him prefer to keep silent on this subject.

Mr. Sparks has made it one of the objects of his many researches to find the exact site where this incident took place, but so far has not succeeded in doing so. Anyone rambling through the underbrush of this peninsula will understand the difficulties that present themselves in this connection. Aside from the report that the place was about three miles from Alton, history does not give any helpful intimations.

Less than half a mile from the main square of the town stands a big rock. This was a landmark well known to western

emigrants in the late 40's and early 50's of the last century. Not all covered wagons went through Westport Landing—the present Kansas City; a great many adventurers chose Alton as a starting point for crossing the Mississippi and Missouri, and it was this rock that guided them along their course. A hundred years ago the picture of a giant bird, painted by Indians, was still visible here. According to an old legend this immense Piaso bird used to swoop down from the skies ever so often, escaping unharmed with human prey in its talons. A great Indian chief finally decided to face the marauder. Armed with a tomahawk he awaited its coming. Suddenly, the whir of tremendous wings was heard and the monster descended for deadly combat. Aided by hundreds of arrows from the bows of his loyal warriors, the chief killed the bird, thereby ending forever the danger to his tribe.

Alton does not lie on a direct route between Chicago and St. Louis and, has not, therefore, attracted many tourists. This makes the place all the more delightful to people who love historical sites for the sake of their associations. Alton can be reached by paved roads from many sides; and even the peninsula on which Shields and Lincoln almost clashed, can be traversed today without leaving cemented thoroughfares.



